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ABSTRACT

Assuming that a romanticized view of American Indians is as disasterous as a bigoted view, this paper considers some alternatives for Native American life directions which go beyond the present narrow choices of either total assimilation within the white value system or isolation on the reservation. Major points presented are: (1) forced assimilation has not worked; (2) indifference is the essence of inhumanity; (3) a viable social philosophy must unite and utilize the experiences and cultures of many different peoples, taking into account the evolving experience of multi-cultural/multi-lingual people; (4) the new organizing principle of our institutions may be symbiotic--the successful and necessary reconciliation of apparently irreconcilable differences; (5) the loss of traditional ways does not necessarily equate with loss of identity (the loss is in and of itself part of the identity), since identity is the conception of or feeling about events lived by a people; (6) the Indian in America needs to feel pride in his people before he can gain self-esteem, and he cannot develop self-esteem if others rob him of the opportunity to do things for himself; (7) coexistence of multiple viable social systems in America should enhance our sense of freedom, as freedom is predicated upon the presence of alternatives. (JC)

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ASSIMILATION VERSUS SELF-IDENTITY: A MODERN NATIVE AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

An Address to the Western Social Science Association Conference (18th Annual)

Arizona State University - Tempe, Arizona
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by

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If you were a Native American, an Indian, I mean, the way you are part of the white dominant value system:

One who had come from another state and had lived in an alien culture; whose English, whether spoken or written, was not quite correct or non-existent, for you had not been to the "right" schools; an Indian, I mean, who belonged to an uprooted social system, and whose home was nowhere, yet had been everywhere; one who had been made as chattel of the government, so that you might be fitted to live in the presence of civilization though you are a descendant of the first Americans; one who neither arrived voluntarily in search of freedom nor was forcibly brought to these shores; you represent one of many tribes having a multitude of languages and cultures developed entirely in this nation - thus you do not necessarily share the values of European civilization; one who knew the blight of the reservation but also the misery of the slums of Los Angeles and Minneapolis; and the failure of the dominant value system to cope with its own cultural identity; and a new world order being born: How would you look at the struggle of the Indian people, their aims, their hopes, their means?

The goal of my presentation is to present considerations and alternatives for healthy life directions which can be made available to the Native American to enable him to go beyond the present narrow choices of either total assimilation within the white value system or remaining isolated on the reservation. In accomplishing this goal, it is necessary to address both Native Americans and the white society. My address will, I hope, offend and anger both groups, for it is impossible to tell the truth about the Indian plight without offending and angering members of both groups. We are all too accustomed to the veil

of half truths which cloak this subject. For hundreds of years, white America has clung to the ideal that if everyone would just be patient, time alone would solve the Indian problem. It hasn't, and it never will. For time, as Martin Luther King points out, is neither good nor bad; it is neutral. What matters is how time is used. Time has been used badly in the United States. We often hear that something must be done and soon about the Indian problem. But do what? The prescription to "do something" appeals to the pragmatic bent of most Americans. But sheer busy-ness is not enough. Solving the "problem of Indians" is not only one of the most urgent pieces of public business facing the United States today; it is also one of the most difficult. In approaching it, public officials and leaders would do well to ponder the traditional warning of mathematicians: to not worry so much about getting the right answer; what counts most is setting up the right problem.

Throughout my paper, I have attempted to maintain the prespective of one who is humanistically sensitive and objective toward all peoples rather than either a bigot or romantic. Often a romanticized view of peoples is as dangerous as a bigoted one. Even going further, George Bernard Shaw in The Devil's Disciple, stated: "The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: That's the essence of inhumanity."

In this incredibly complex world, each of us - non-Indian as well as Indian - needs to examine ourselves to identify our goals and our motivations. As a search for a better idea of what we stand for, toward what we are headed, and what we think is truly important to be conveyed to our youth, we must indulge in a critical self-scrutiny to help stabilize the environment for ourselves and our youth in the rapidly changing world. A close look at ourselves can contribute to that much sought-after capacity of autonomy of self, and gives us greater ability to

make wise and useful choices in adopting the skills of the dominant society, to exert control over our own destiny.

If it never easy for any people to look closely at themselves, particularly when they are surrounded by a foreign culture. Most do so only when forced by crisis, anxiety, or a blunt confrontation with reality. For us who are Indian, the time to take a hard look at ourselves and give direction to our "public" image is now. How are we to go about this? How do we ensure that our remaining culture not be lost to succeeding generations? To what purposes should we dedicate our efforts and our lives? What are our personal priorities, and how well does our life's work reflect these priorities? Most of us will recognize in a period of serious reflection that the "important things" in our lives are often deferred with some self-assuring, but self-deceiving assumption that there will always be time "tomorrow".

The problem of preserving an Indian culture is complex when it is in the midst of - and often in conflict with - a dominant society. In the United States, we have had much experience with many different Indian groups, but there are no adequate answers to the disturbing questions of how they are to remain Indian, or whether they should be woven fully into the fabric of the dominant culture, or how a middle course between these extremes might be navigated to the benefit of all.

Being Indian, in the traditional sense, is often said to be possible only in the past. Indians should learn new ways (Anglo ones, of course) and their incomes would go up, their health would be better, and, therefore, they would be happier.

I think perhaps Anglos sincerely believed this. Inevitably, as a result of their limited experience, Anglos saw what was going on in the Indian world in narrow terms and formulated goals for

Indians from this restricted perspective. Indeed, a culture is not just costume, language and menu. It is a way of looking at the past from a rich historical perspective.

I am sure that if a well-informed historian had pointed out to the government agents and non-Indian reservation dwellers of earlier days that cultural assimilation has rarely, if ever, taken place among the peoples of the world, he would have both met with a complete inability to understand.

The Indians cannot be considered a typical "immigrant" people, such as those from Europe, Scandinavia or elsewhere. They did not voluntarily seek Anglo-American ways and values. It was wrong to lump Jewish Americans, Italian Americans, German Americans and all the others together with the Indians in one great "melting pot." It just wouldn't work. A community is not merely a variety of common interest and ties which hold people together, but an organization of these elements by an integrating principle. The concept of an inherent universally common force for all communities within the American society does not consider the obvious fact of a plurality of social values, with its indifference and even hostility to others.

In reality, the replacement of one culture by another has actually been very unusual in history. Even when a dominant society destroys the family and other basic social ties, as in the case of the Blacks brought to the United States as slaves, the complete assimilation of one culture by another is so exceptional that one has to search hard for an example in all the pages of human history. (Exterminations there have been, unfortunately, but hardly ever complete assimilations.)

What happens more often is that people thrown into contact by the surging events of history borrow from one another and merge their customs, beliefs, and values into new combinations of

culture elements. This happened on a grand scale in what we now call Latin American. Spaniards and Indians intermarried, interborrowed, and created new cultures like that of modern Mexico, a culture which is certainly not Spanish nor Indian, but a new, vigorous, and important culture of the modern world.

Nevertheless, most big political states have built up their power by conquest, like the United States, Spain, and Great Britain. The ethnic group which became dominant in the course of conquest usually has believed (and still does at this stage of world history) that it will be stronger if only it can erase the cultural differences of all the people it has brought under its power. Hence, modern empires, as well as ancient ones, have subjected their conquered peoples to assimilation programs, in efforts to make at least religion, language, local governments and educational institutions just like those of the dominant ethnic group.

Repeatedly, forced assimilation programs have been adopted and one after another they have failed. It is important to understand why they fail in order to understand the course of events leading to today's native American dilemma.

Take, for instance, England's attempt to assimilate the Irish, which has lasted for 600 years. We all know from the headlines that the Irish are very much in evidence in the modern world, yet as early as the 14th Century, the English set out to destroy their cultural individuality. Today, the Irish are kept in the news by the Irish Republican Army's two factions which refuse to accept compromise with their demand for total separation of Ireland from Great Britain.

The Irish experience is not unique. They are one of six peoples today in the British Isles and the Breton Penninsula of France who are struggling to maintain themselves as distinct people

from the dominant English and French cultures. They are a people of Celtic background, who lived in the British Isles and France long before their neighbors. They are the Celtic peoples whom the English and French pushed aside to marginal places as they carried out their conquest. The Irish, Welsh, Scotts, Manx, Cornish and the Bretons, have asserted themselves and are reviving the use of their Celtic languages and customs.

The case of the Celts closely parallels the Indians of the United States. Both were invaded and survived conditions destructive to their ways of life, but have not lost their cultural identities.

In Spain during the last five hundred years, the course of events was basically similar to that of Britain and the United States. The Iberian Penninsula, which became Spain, has been inhabited by a long succession of different peoples. In the 14th Century, the Castilians conquered or made political alliances with most of their different peoples and forced the Moors, along with thousands of Jews, out of the Penninsula into Africa. Their expulsion in 1492 marked the beginning of the Castilian domination, not only of the people of the Iberian Penninsula, but also of the newly encountered world of the Americas.

The Castilians set about to make the Iberian Penninsula culturally homogeneous. The Basques eventually became alienated and at present are engaged in an underground independence movement almost as violent as that of the Irish.

The sought-after social philosophy must unite and utilize the experiences and cultures of many different peoples. It must take into account the evolving experience of multi-cultural and multi-lingual people. It will need to be cognizant of the widespread ambivalence about human nature. To effectively cope with this struggle, we may very well need to define a new human pantheism. If so, the new organizing principle of our institutions

will be symbiotic - the successful and necessary reconciliation of apparently irreconcilable differences.

When two peoples of different experience and history are thrown together into a heterogeneous group, each has some awareness of the past and defines itself in terms of that past. These events cannot be destroyed; they have happened. Moreover, the continuing events in the contact of the two groups differ. Thus, hostility over being forced into a new and unchosen mold keeps them apart. People can be forced to do things in new and different ways, but that act in and of itself becomes part of the distinctive experience of the group and adds to their distinctiveness. Yet, I maintain that a loss of traditional ways does not necessarily equate to a loss of identity.

So ~~must~~ much for assimilation as an unrealistic goal for Indians, indeed all minorities, whether now, in the past, or in the future. This logically brings us to the subject of identity, and pluralistic society. I have spoken of the historical experience of a people as a basic fact precluding cultural assimilation. It is this same historical experience which gives rise to the identity of a people. And it is a common misunderstanding to think that group identity is the sum of cultural traits. Identity is a conception of and feelings about the events which a people have lived. It is the meaning of events in which one's ancestors took part, in ways that make one proud, which differentiate people into ethnic groups.

It is particularly true that members of a compact group - such as a tribe or closely knit family - are relatively free of frustration and hence almost immune to the appeal for social change. Also the frustration engendered by the sense of insecurity is less intense among reservation Indians who are intent on preserving their identity - than it would be for a minority bent on blending with the majority. The tribal community,

desiring to preserve its identity, is a compact whole which shelters the individual, gives a sense of belonging and shelters against frustration.

The words of Chief Dan George, a 76 year old Swinomish Indian, depict cultural feelings, the crushing sense of indifference, and in part an answer to the concern for identity.

Dan George, an Indian Chief from the Burrard Reserve in Vancouver, British Columbia, depicts accurately the insight needed to effectively assist in Indian economic development.

> Was it only yesterday that men first sailed around the moon? You and I marvel that men should travel so far and so fast. Yet, if they have traveled far, then I have traveled farther, and if they have traveled fast, then I faster, for I was born as if it were a thousand years ago, born in a culture of bows and arrows. But within the span of half a life, I was flung across the ages to the culture of the atom bomb, and from bows and arrows to atom bombs is a distance far beyond a flight to the moon.
>
> I was born in an age that loved the things of nature and gave them beautiful names like Tes-wall-u-wit, instead of dried-up names like Stanley Park.
>
> I was born when people loved all nature and spoke to it as though it has a soul. I can remember going up Indian River with my father when I was very young. I can remember his watching the sun light fires of brilliance on Mount Pay-nay-ray as it rose about its peak. I can remember his singing thanks to it, as he often did, singing the Indian word "thanks" so very, very softly.
>
> And then the people came. More and more people came. Like a crushing, rushing wave they came, hurling the years aside. And suddenly I found myself a young man in the midst of the twentieth century. I found myself and my people adrift in this new age, not part of it.
>
> We were engulfed by its rushing tide, but only as a captive eddy, going round and round. On little

> reservations, on plots of land, we floated in a kind of gray unreality, ashamed of our culture that you ridiculed, unsure of who we were or where we were going, uncertain of our grip on the present, weak in our hope of the future. And it is where we pretty well stand today.
>
> . . . Do you know what it is like to feel that you are of no value to society and those around you? To know that people came to help you but not to work with you, for you knew that they knew you had nothing to offer?
>
> . . . Do you know what it is like to be without pride in your race, pride in your family, pride and confidence in yourself? Do you know what it is like? You don't know, for you have never tasted its bitterness.
>
> . . . I know you must be saying, Tell us what you want. What do we want? We want, first of all, to be respected and to feel we are people of worth. We want an equal opportunity to succeed in life, but we cannot succeed on your terms; we cannot raise ourselves on your norms.

Experiences such as this provide meaning to identity for Indians. I do not want you to feel that traits, such as language, arts, crafts, or customs are unimportant in maintaining a sense of identity, but persistence of identity does not depend totally on such traits.

The plight of Indians in America is that they are Indians first and only secondly an individual. Only when the Indian community as a whole performs feats to engender admiration from society will they be complete as individuals. The Indian in America needs pride - in his people, their achievements, their leaders - before attaining self-esteem. And it must be a do-it-yourself job. Anything done <u>for</u> Indian people robs them of an opportunity to gain self-esteem through self-effort and achievement.

It is not forms but <u>meanings</u> which make the real difference between Indians and other ethnic groups.

If one wishes to realize the distance between "facts" and their meanings, all that is required is to enter into a discussion of social issues. Many people suppose that facts carry their meaning along with them. Accumulate enough facts and their interpretation stares out at you; but no one is ever forced just by the collection of facts to accept their meaning, so long as one retains some preconceived value system of interpretation. Only when facts are received into a non-biased environment is altered conviction a meaningful possibility. In any event, social philosophy demonstrates an immense gap between facts and doctrines. It should be noted however that most frequently the different theories which mark political philosophy do not develop apart from facts which they interpret, but rather are emphasized factors from among facts. In a social science, the more sincerely we appeal to facts, the greater is the importance of the distinction between facts which alter human activity and facts which are altered by human activity. And to the degree which this difference is ignored, social science becomes pseudo-science.

Studies related to American Indians completed to date have been almost universally synchronic in scope and have often missed incorporating the rich traditions of culture into their design, being rather focused toward the problems of Indians adaptation to paternalistic Anglo-oriented and sponsored programs. On the other hand, longitudinal studies which have framed modern Indian culture in the context of tribal heritage have been justly criticized by Indian leaders as being of little utility to them. Cultural heritage is crucial in the development of any successful program, but not the heritage of dropoutism, unemployment and alcoholism that has been cast upon the Indian in numerous studies and workshops dealing with the "Indian Problem." Such problems are not to be ignored, but neither are they sufficient to define a meaningful course of overall social action.

The irony of the present understanding of American Indian problems is that in the attempt to gain contemporary recognition of those problems, the dominant society has been caught up in fantasies. "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee," "The Memoirs of Chief Red Fox," and "Touch the Wind" succeeded in their intentions, but their reception only reinforced the fact that the American dominate society could easily sympathize with phantoms of the past while ignoring the lack of improvement to obviate the current debilitating situation.

How can a society truly understand American history without studying early tribal governments and their decisive influence on the history of the U.S.A., its policies and institutions; without learning that the U.S. government structure was modeled, in part, after the League of the Iroquois; that Russeau and other philosophers who inspired Europeans to oppose feudal tyranny and oppression based their views on the personal freedom they found in Indian societies?

The coexistence of multiple viable social systems within America would enhance our sense of freedom. For freedom is predicated on the presence of alternatives in the economic, political, and cultural areas. Even in the absence of tyranny, freedom becomes meaningless where there is abject poverty, political inertness, and cultural sameness.

The heritage of the Indian is the basic cultural strain of the Americas. Whereas the European heritage, the African, and so forth, are vital to the plural society, it is the heritage of indigenous America that is common to us all. It is this heritage - that of the first Americans - which makes all of us on this continent uniquely American with respect to the rest of the world. Unfortunately, this basic truth has never been reflected in history.

Thus the pattern of the government's Indian program - reflecting the dominant's society's will - develops: Thirty year periods of ignoring that Indians exist, punctuated by legislation to assimilate them. To date the complexity of dealing with cultural and personal diversity has led to inactivity for the most part and where addressed led to imposed probity in the form of coercive assimilation attempts. Thoreau's comment that, if he knew that someone was coming to do him good, he would run for his life, is applicable to the role of government in regard to the American Indian.

To one who is unsure, the future seems barren, offering nothing which would surpass that which is or has been. When one's mode of life is so precarious as to make it clear that nothing can be done to control the circumstances of life, one tends to stick to proven and familiar ways. People counteract a deep feeling of insecurity by making their existence a fixed routine, thereby acquiring the illusion of taming the unpredictable. There is thus a conservatism of the destitute as strong as the conservatism of the privileged. This often reflects the Indian life style - especially on reservations.

Discontent is highest when misery is bearable; when conditions have so improved that near equity seems within reach. A grievance is most poignant when almost redressed. It is not actual suffering but the hope of better things which excite people to a social behavior. Also it should be remembered that equality without freedom creates a more stable social pattern than freedom without equality.

You in this room are the social scientists - the new guardians of social truth, social values and the improvement of society generally. A word of caution - all too often a class of experts becomes so removed from common interests as to become a class with private interests and private knowledge, which in social

science is not knowledge at all. Even such a devotee of the intellectual life as Albert Einstein recognized the importance of values when he said: "It is essential that individuals acquire an understanding of and a lively feeling for values. He must acquire a vivid sense of the beautiful and the morally good. Otherwise, he - with his specialized knowledge - more closely resembles a well-trained dog than a harmoniously developed person." The social science experts within the various governments who determine "what is best for Indians," without Indian input as to their perceived needs, have established oligarchies. Some of my colleagues would argue that the Indian people do not have the expertise to solve their social problems. To this I would answer, it is not necessary to possess great investigative expertise; what is needed is the ability to judge the impact of proposed action upon the common concerns of Indians. Until prejudice, bias, misrepresentation, and propaganda as well as sheer ignorance of Indian history and culture are replaced by inquiry and publicity, there is no way of knowing how well proposed social policies can be judged by Indian people.

In conclusion, I would say that for Indians to choose Indian ethnic identity rather than assimilation will not only enrich their lives but other ethnic groups as well. Such a choice will also provide the dominant society a conscious awareness of difference - not just tolerance. For tolerance is no longer an acceptable concept to Native Americans.